FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
MARCH 17, 2002

NO STORY SO DIVINE
John M. Buchanan

Christ saves us simply by being God with us... The cross represents the culmination of the incarnation: divinity fully united with humanity... Therefore, nothing that can happen to us — no pain, no humiliation, no journey into a far country or even into the valley of the shadow of death — can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 9:39). The cross shows that in Christ God is with us, no matter what. Even when we doubt or disbelieve or think ourselves completely cut off from God, Christ has been there before us. Christ is, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said of God, "the great companion — the fellow sufferer who understands."

William C. Placher
Jesus the Savior,
The Meaning of Jesus
Christ for Christian Faith

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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NO STORY SO DIVINE
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 130
John 11:45-53
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

As we come closer to the cross, O God, silence in us any voice but yours. And startle us again with this story that we know so well, its truth and its power. Open our hearts now to your love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

At about this time of year, we start to worry about and plan for Easter around here. Not unlike churches all over the country, we are full on Easter; more than full actually. We try to provide space in the building for everyone who wants to go to church on Easter. We rent closed-circuit television equipment and put television screens around the building. We rent stanchions and ropes so the people inside can get out safely and those waiting outside can proceed inside in a timely and orderly fashion. Fourth Church ushers become heroic on Easter. People do not always understand why they can't get in, or get their favorite pew, or get any pew; people who have to stand in lines outside on a cold Chicago Sunday morning in March are not happy people. We even talked this year about having a cart with pots of Starbucks coffee and low-fat carrot muffins travel up and down the line of people waiting outside to get in and decided that it might just make matters worse. So we're not going to do that.

We do not, needless to say, have any of these problems on Good Friday.

The chaplain of Duke University, William Willimon, was a parish pastor before he went to Duke, and he remembers the time his Methodist church decided to put a cross—a big, life-sized, rough-hewn cross, out on the church lawn for Lent. And the neighbors called city hall to complain because the cross was so ugly, so depressing, they said.

Willimon says he's always been tempted to put a sign out in front of the church before Easter that says, "No one gets in tomorrow who wasn't here on Good Friday."

The cross is the universally recognized symbol of our faith. I learned this week about the sign language symbol for Jesus. If you want to sign the word *Jesus*, you take your left middle finger and touch the palm of your right hand, and then you take the right middle finger and touch the palm of your left hand. When you do that, you say the name Jesus—the one with wounded hands, the crucified one. (See Barbara Lundblad, *Transforming the Stone*, p. 46.)

When he was about 30 years old, Jesus of Nazareth spent three years in the region of Galilee teaching, healing the sick, announcing the coming reign of God, which he insisted had already begun. He must have been a charismatic teacher, because crowds of people started to show up wherever he was teaching: in local synagogues, out in the open air, on a mountainside, standing in a fishing boat. The crowds began to follow him from place to place. At some point, some of them began to speculate that he might be the promised Messiah. And to some people that sounded blasphemous, maybe even like treason—particularly if you were a Roman government official. If you were a temple authority, a religious official, a priest or a Pharisee, a Galilean peasant going around claiming to be the Messiah sounded like trouble. During the third year, he decided that he must go to Jerusalem for the Passover. When he did, in the event we celebrate next Sunday, some of the other pilgrims who were in the city recognized him and held a kind of noisy street demonstration during which the quiet suggestion that he was the promised Messiah became loud, joyful shouts of "Hosanna!— Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

It was too much for the authorities, who quickly got together and decided that he was a threat to public peace and order and that he might also be guilty of sedition for allowing and even encouraging the crowds of riffraff to call him king. And so they got rid of him, quickly—pathetically easily. There was nothing to it, really. They found him and arrested him at night and arranged for a hasty hearing and trial, convicted him, and the next day put him to death using the method Romans used for the poor, the outcast, and their political enemies: crucifixion. It was not pretty. It was public and brutal and humiliating and excruciating and by sundown Friday it was all over. By any reckoning, his mission had failed. Just five days after he entered the arena of real power—political power, economic power, religious power, and supremely military power—he was shown to be powerless, weak, and helpless—a defenseless victim.

That story, Christian faith maintains, however, is not simply the account of a brave but naïve young man, in way over his head, a helpless victim of the cruel reality of life in this world. That story, Christian faith maintains, is the story of God and God's love and the power of love to change and reconcile and forgive and redeem and recreate. It is, faith maintains, the story of real power shown in weakness, the story of the lengths God will go to love the world and you and me.

About 20 or 25 years after it happened, St. Paul wrote a letter to a small community of believers in the Greek city of Corinth and he said, "The message of the cross is foolishness" in the eyes of the world, a "stumbling block" to people who know that real power is invested in the state, the army, the Roman legions with bright armor and sharp spears and deadly swords. "But," Paul wrote, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Weakness, suffering, dying as a victim at the hands of the state—those are not terms we ordinarily use to discuss God, and it has been noted many times that our culture, in fact, stumbles over all these ideas and "massively resists a theology of the cross." (See William Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, p. 111.) The most popular religious literature these days has to do not with strength in

suffering, power in weakness, but with self improvement: how to be better, how to be stronger, more confident, how to feel better about yourself, how to get what you want and enjoy what you get. It doesn't have much to do with the cross.

The other direction popular religion takes is out of this world, away from this world where brave young men are rejected and summarily executed. In a Tempo feature in Wednesday's *Chicago Tribune,* staff writer Lou Carloza covered the amazing publishing phenomenon of the Left Behind series of novels based roughly on a literalistic reading of the Book of Revelation. The books are written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. There are 9 novels, which have sold an astonishing 50 million copies. There will eventually be 12 novels and an 18-book children's series, comic books, and movies. The authors are very rich. The novels tell about a "planet in peril," jets crash, folks evaporate from their clothes, and "locusts swarm with a sickening hum that heralds the end of the world." The plots are all similar: "All saved Christians, dead and alive, get snatched away into heaven. Those of weak faith get 'left behind' to fight the antichrist. A seven-year tribulation of plagues and earthquakes ravage the planet. Then Jesus Christ returns in glory to rule for 1,000 years" (*Chicago Tribune,* 13 March 2002).

Sales doubled after September 11, and the series seems to be on its way to becoming the all-time best seller.

Other than the fact that the books grossly misuse the Book of Revelation by taking its complex symbolism literally, what's so wrong is the notion, the proposal, the confident announcement that God will rescue a few people from an ultimately damned world—and all the rest are excluded, left behind. God rescues a few true believers and all the rest, the vast majority of the human race— people of other faiths, people of no faith, people of weak faith, people of the wrong kind of Christian faith—are condemned, lost forever.

What a smug, sorry contrast that is to the theology of the cross, which attempts to express something of the lengths to which God will go to express love for the world, the depths to which God will go to pursue and claim and redeem human beings.

The cross planted in the earth is the symbol of God's passionate love affair with creation—all of it. The cross is the symbol of God's love for human beings. Professor William Placher, whose book is being studied by an Adult Education class, says, "God did not stand by and watch someone else die on the cross. . . . . In Jesus Christ, God was there, dying. We thus see how much God loves us" (Placher, p. 112).

The cross is foolishness, a stumbling block, St. Paul warned.

Of course, we would prefer a more traditional God, a God of power and might, a God who rules from a throne in heaven, a God who hurls thunderbolts and is seen in the powerful wind and storms of nature. That makes a kind of elemental sense. We'd prefer the God Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: huge, muscular, potent, a lot like the Zeus of Greek

mythology. That's a God to fire the soul and stiffen the backbone. And it is a notion of God we all prefer and sometimes maintain in our souls.

And then tragedy happens: a dear one dies, the test comes back positive, a dream is shattered, a relationship ends, a plane slams into the World Trade Center, a 19-month-old baby boy is found beaten to death in Cabrini-Green, and suddenly your all-powerful, muscular, omnipotent God is exposed—either causing the suffering or unable to prevent it, and neither alternative is very comforting or helpful.

But the cross, the cross of Jesus Christ, is a symbol of God's suffering, God's Son entering into our humanity, a symbol that he, God, ends up subject to the same limitations as all the rest of us. The cross reveals a truth beyond our ability to explain it, or even understand it much: the truth that God doesn't cause human suffering—your suffering—but enters into it; the truth that God does not observe our suffering with objective neutrality. God enters into it and experiences it and demonstrates that nothing that can happen, no pain, no tragedy, no God-forsakenness can separate us from God's love. Not even our doubt, not even disbelief—even when we experience abandonment and loneliness and God-forsakeness, even when we cannot sing the hymns and say the words, God is for us and God's love surrounds us. Even when we cannot believe in God, God is believing in us.

Michelangelo created another image of God besides the muscular deity stretched out across the magnificent ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It's actually in St. Peter's in Rome, as well, over in the corner just inside the massive front doors. It is his "Pieta," the lifeless form of a young man, cradled in the arms of his mother. It is a far truer and much more powerful portrayal of what Christian faith means by the word God.

I love something that William Stringfellow said 40 years ago. Stringfellow was a lawyer who gave his life to working in the worst neighborhood of Harlem. He was also one of the most brilliant theologians this country ever produced. When the legendary Karl Barth visited our country he said Stringfellow caught his attention more than any other person. I tracked down Stringfellow's 1962 book, *A Private and Public Faith,* which I read in 1967 and which had a big impact on me, and I found what I was looking for—an underlined passage that I think about every single Sunday when we recite the Apostles' Creed. Stringfellow wrote:

> He descended into Hell—
> That is very cheerful news.
> There is nothing less than Hell unknown to him. There is nothing that I have known this side of hell that is unfamiliar to him. There is nothing known to me which I am wont to call Hell which he has not already known. (p. 69)

You probably never heard of William Stringfellow, because his promising career was cut short. Diagnosed with cancer, he died shortly thereafter. He was very young, but before he died he wrote, "Christ means, after all, simply that God is radically intimate with human history and

experience in all its grandeur and diversity and personality. Christ has already lived my life. Christ has already died my death. Christ is risen from death for me" (p. 70)

The time comes for all of us to face this. We do it when we have to turn a dear one over to the surgeon, or when we ourselves know our own limits and mortality; for some it is every airplane trip; for many it was a blunt reminder of mortality as dreadful as September 11 and as close as a metal scaffolding falling from the Hancock building.

When our time comes, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

> to step into the darkness without understanding what it is all about, we may not go bravely or wisely. . . . Some of us may have to crawl, and other of us to be carried, but that we can go at all has everything to do with the [cross] and this [one] who dares us to believe that God is at the bottom of everything, especially the things we cannot understand, with strong arms to catch us when the net breaks, with loving arms to catch us when all our dying is done. (*God in Pain*, p. 94)

When I was about 10 years old, my parents bundled me off to church camp one week every summer. In the morning, after breakfast, we attended classes, a lot like Sunday school but taught by ministers from other churches in the presbytery. I didn't much like those classes, but I do remember something I learned in one of them. The teacher was Ralph Illingworth, who was the minister at State College, a big church. He was big, too, and jovial, and I loved him because he could hit a softball a mile. That gave him a lot of credibility in my book. He was teaching a class of young boys about the Apostles' Creed, and he said, "Fellas, when you get to the words 'crucified, dead, buried, he descended into hell,' bow your heads. It is an old Christian custom to bow your head in reverence at that part. And then, as you say, 'On the third day he rose again from the dead,' you can raise your head again."

Years later I'm still doing it. For all the theologizing and thinking and writing we've done about it, it comes down to the mystery of God's love in that man dying on the cross, comes down finally to that ultimate demonstration of God's love for the whole world, God's determination to love and reconcile the world and everyone, every child of God; comes down finally to reverent silence, a bowed head.

> Here might I stay and sing,
> No story so divine,
> Never was love, dear King
> Never was grief, like thine.
> This is my Friend
> In whose sweet praise
> I all my days
> could gladly spend.

Amen.